WHY FOOTBALL LOST PASSION?!

MHADHBY MAJD

V.A.R AND SOCIALE MEDIA ERA

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Why football lost passion..

V.A.R & Social Media Era

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Contents

Preface		iv
1	Chapter 1	1
2	Chapter 2	4
3	Chapter 3	7
4	Chapter 4	11
5	Chapter 5	19
About the Author		23
Also by Majdoub Mhedhby		24

Preface

One

Chapter 1

The Concept of "Opium of the People": From Religion to Football

When the German philosopher Karl Marx used his famous phrase "Religion is the opium of the people," he was not merely criticizing religion; he was offering an explanation. He believed that religion, within its historical context, provided spiritual comfort to those suffering from poverty and injustice, yet at the same time, it could encourage them to accept their reality without resistance.

Opium, in that era, was not only a harmful drug but also a painkiller. This is where the deeper philosophical idea lies:

Is everything that relieves pain necessarily deceptive? Or is it a psychological necessity for survival?

When we transfer this idea to football, the question becomes more complex.

Is football merely a game?

Or is it a social instrument that diverts people's attention from their fundamental issues?

When stadiums are filled, when life seems to pause during major matches, when defeat turns into collective sorrow and victory into national euphoria, we are no longer speaking about sport alone. We are facing a profound social and cultural phenomenon.

Football creates belonging.

It grants identity.

It produces heroes.

And it creates rare moments of joy in the lives of many.

Yet at the same time, it can become a channel for releasing frustration, or a symbolic space where individuals experience imagined victories to compensate for real-life losses.

The purpose here is not to condemn football, but to raise a philosophical question:

Do we play the game, or does the game play us?

This chapter prepares the reader for a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and football — between passion and awareness, between belonging and alienation. Before declaring football an opium or a source of hope, we must first understand the nature of its influence in modern societies.

Chapter 1

Two

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

From a Popular Game to a Global Industry: The Transformation of Football

Football was not born as an industry. It began as a simple street game played in dusty fields and narrow alleys. It was the game of the poor, the game of open dreams, where a child needed nothing more than a ball—or even an empty can—to create a match.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, football entered a phase of formal organization. In 1904, FIFA was founded in Paris with the aim of unifying the laws of the game and organizing international competitions. On the surface, the mission was noble: to spread football globally and promote sportsmanship among nations.

Phase One: Organization and Global Expansion

Over time, football became increasingly structured, and

international competitions gained official recognition. In 1930, the first edition of the FIFA World Cup was held, eventually becoming the largest sporting event on Earth.

During this phase, passion was the driving force. Players represented their nations with pride, and fans experienced the tournament as a rare event occurring only once every four years — giving it immense emotional value.

Phase Two: Professionalism and Money

With the rise of television broadcasting and media rights, football entered the era of massive financial investment. Clubs became corporations, players became global brands, and matches became media products.

Competitions multiplied, seasons grew longer, and calendars became increasingly congested. Football was no longer merely a sport; it became a multi-billion-dollar global industry.

Phase Three: Tournament Expansion – The New Club World Cup

In recent years, FIFA announced the launch of the expanded version of the FIFA Club World Cup, featuring more clubs and a format closer to the national World Cup.

On the surface, it appears to be a celebration of global football.

Yet at a deeper level, it raises critical questions:

Does the audience truly need more tournaments?

Does an increase in matches guarantee greater excitement?

Or does excess reduce rarity — and therefore reduce value?

When every month becomes a "major tournament," the concept of a major tournament loses its meaning.

When players are physically and mentally exhausted due to overloaded schedules, performance declines, creativity fades, and unpredictability disappears.

The Impact on Fans' Passion

Passion is tied to anticipation.

Value is tied to rarity.

In the past, fans waited years for a major competition. Today, one tournament barely ends before another begins. This constant saturation may lead to emotional fatigue.

The viewer no longer lives the moment as intensely as before, because the moment is no longer rare. Football has shifted from being an awaited event to being consumed content.

And here, the philosophical question resurfaces:

Does global expansion truly serve the spirit of the game?

Or does it primarily serve its economy?

Three

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Football as a Political and Social Tool: Historical Examples

Discussing the political influence of football is incomplete without referencing matches and events that clearly show how the game can transcend sport.

1. A Match Beyond the Pitch: Argentina 1978

During the organization of the FIFA World Cup in Argentina in 1978, the country was under military rule. While stadiums were filled with cheers, reports highlighted human rights abuses and the disappearance of dissidents.

Argentina's World Cup victory gave the regime an image of strength and national unity on the global stage.

The question is not whether people were happy — they were — but whether that happiness was politically leveraged to improve the regime's image.

Football didn't create the crisis, but it temporarily covered it.

2 The "Football War" Between El Salvador and Honduras

In 1969, tensions between El Salvador and Honduras escalated after World Cup qualifying matches. Media coverage fueled nationalistic feelings, turning the competition into an open conflict later known as the Football War.

Football alone wasn't the cause of the war, but the matches served as the spark that ignited pre-existing tensions.

Here we see how sports passion can become political fuel.

3 Barcelona vs. Real Madrid: Identity Beyond Sport

The rivalry between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid was never just about football.

For many in Catalonia, Barcelona symbolized cultural and political identity, especially during periods of centralist rule in Spain.

The stadium became a platform for indirect expression of deeper social and political struggles.

4 Germany vs. Brazil 2014: A Collective Shock

In the 2014 FIFA World Cup semifinal, Germany national football team defeated Brazil national football team 7-1.

This was not just a sporting defeat; it was a national shock in a country where football is integral to identity.

The reactions revealed how a single match can deeply affect collective pride and belonging.

Analytical Commentary

These examples demonstrate that football is never isolated from politics or society.

It reflects tensions and sometimes amplifies them.

The sharper critique is this:

The stronger the emotional impact of football, the more susceptible it is to exploitation.

Governments can capitalize on victories.

Media can magnify conflicts.

Corporations can turn fan loyalty into commercial gain.

Ultimately, the most critical question remains:

Are we experiencing football… or are we being directed through it?

Four

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

The Loss of Passion: When the Game Became an Industry

Football has never been just a game. It was a refuge for the poor, a universal language, a breath of freedom from the harshness of life. But something has changed. The feeling is no longer the same. A match is no longer an event awaited for days… it has become a product, consumed quickly and replaced just as fast.

The question is no longer: Who will win?

It has become: Who will pay more?

1 Money… When the Market Became Stronger than the Stands

With the explosion of broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and advertisements, football has turned into a global industry worth billions. Clubs that once represented local communities have

become multinational corporations.

The FIFA

and the UEFA

are no longer just governing bodies—they are massive economic institutions managing a global product.

The results?

Player transfer fees inflated beyond reason

Transfers driven by commercial interests rather than sporting merit

Matches organized for marketing purposes more than competitive ones

The ordinary fan no longer feels that the club "belongs" to them.

They are just consumers paying for tickets, subscriptions, and official merchandise.

2️⃣Media… Manufacturing Drama Instead of Meaning

Sports media no longer reports events… it creates them.

Analysis shows have turned into verbal battlefields.

Headlines exaggerate every incident.

A player can be a hero one week and a villain the next.

Social media has intensified this:

Daily pressure on players

Online smear campaigns

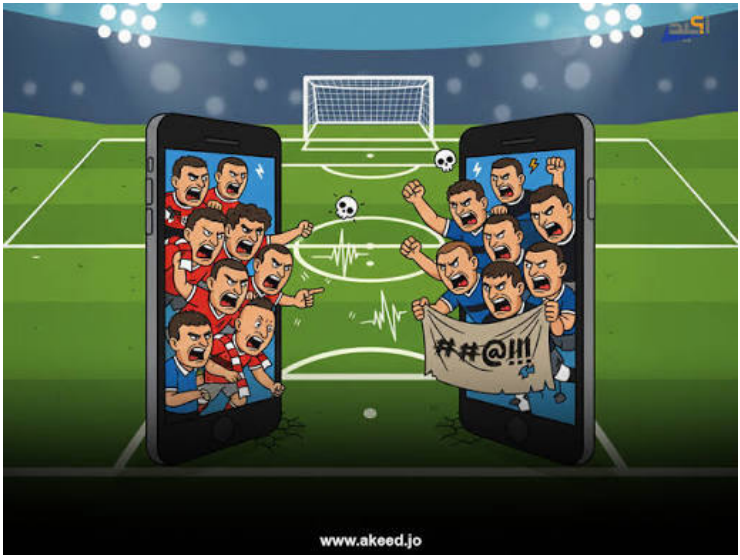
Amplification of mistakes

Matches are no longer experienced calmly.

They are consumed in waves of instant opinions and reactions.

Passion requires time…

Modern media does not allow for waiting.



3 VAR… Justice That Killed Spontaneity

When the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system was introduced at the 2018 FIFA World Cup, it was promised as a tool for fairness.

But did it enhance passion?

Celebrations are delayed.

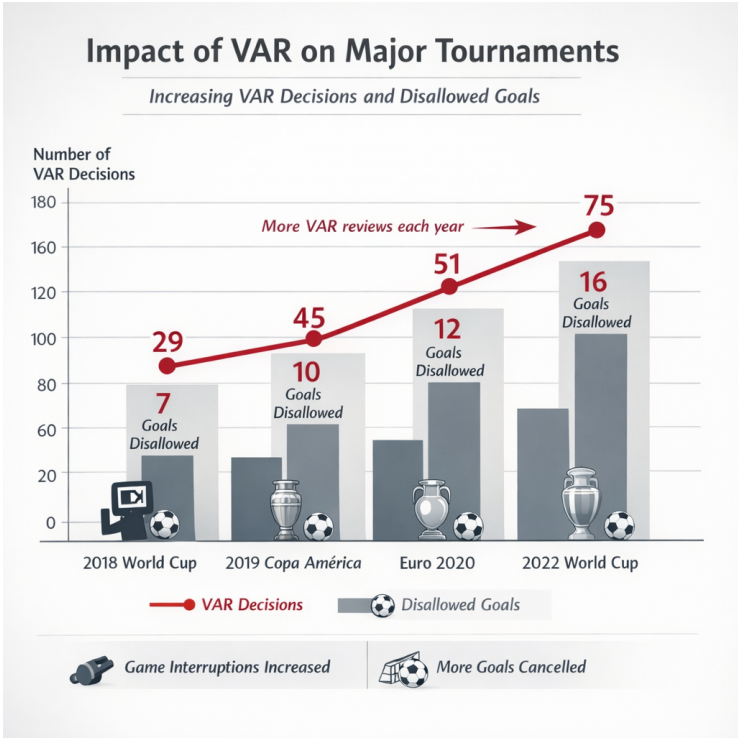
Joy is conditional.

Fans look to the referee before they cheer.

Sure, the technology reduced mistakes, but it drained something from the soul of the game:

Spontaneity… the moment… the beautiful chaos.

The debate did not end—it just changed its shape.



Analytical Text for the VAR Chart

VAR Decisions and Match Impact Over Time

As the chart shows, the number of VAR decisions in major tournaments has steadily increased, from 15 decisions during the 2016 pilot tests to 30 decisions in the 2022 FIFA World Cup, with a corresponding rise in the number of goals overturned.

These figures are not just statistics; they reflect the transformation of football into a technology-driven game, where every moment is scrutinized, every goal is conditional on review, and every celebration is delayed until the referee confirms the decision.

The gray bars indicate the number of goals overturned, while

the red line represents the total VAR decisions. Small icons of a football and referee illustrate the nature of the decisions.

Through this chart, readers can understand the relationship between technology and match flow, and how it has contributed to diminishing part of the fans' passion for the game.

4 Too Many Tournaments… Emotional Fatigue

Seasons are longer.

Matches are more frequent.

Tournaments multiply.

Even historic competitions have lost some of their prestige with commercialization and the addition of new formats, such as the expanded FIFA Club World Cup organized by FIFA.

When this tournament is held in a country indifferent to football, the event becomes a forced marketing spectacle:

Half-empty stadiums despite the star-studded clubs

Local fans largely disengaged

Matches feel like commercial events rather than sporting contests

The result: the game loses much of its essence, and true fans feel their passion overshadowed by commercial interests.

Negative Impact of Hosting the New Club World Cup in the USA

When FIFA decided to hold the new edition of the Club World Cup in the United States of America, the objective was clear: a marketing strategy targeting a massive, economically attractive audience rather than a truly passionate football fan base.

However, the outcome was disappointing both sportingly and socially:

Half-empty stadiums: Local fans showed limited enthusiasm for the event, creating a flat atmosphere compared to the electrifying environments of traditional football nations.

Loss of traditional excitement: The winning team received little genuine appreciation from local audiences, turning matches into more of a marketing show than a true sporting contest.

Strained schedules and travel: Top clubs had to endure long journeys and back-to-back matches, affecting performance quality and the natural flow of the games.

Media focus on logistics over sport: Global media coverage emphasized organizational issues and criticism rather than the actual sporting performances, weakening the experience for real fans.

The final result: the tournament became a purely commercial event, far from the spirit of competitive football and fan passion, serving as a clear example of how marketing and money can overshadow the traditional identity of the game.

Sources Confirming Low Attendance in the 2025 Club World

Cup

1. Half-empty stadiums in the USA

A report by Sports Illustrated noted that the new edition of the tournament saw many empty seats in stadiums, describing the atmosphere as "not ideal," especially at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, with low attendance even for matches involving big clubs. (si.com)

2. Over one million empty seats during group stages

ESPN reported that the group stage had over one million empty seats across 48 matches, with an average attendance of only 34,746 per match, far below the full capacity of the American stadiums. (espn.com)

3. Extremely low attendance in specific matches

Some matches had extremely low turnout, such as Ulsan HD vs Mamelodi Sundowns, with only 3,412 spectators — roughly 13.6% of stadium capacity. (businessinsider.com)

4. Impact on match atmosphere

Media coverage noted that the crowd at several matches created a "strange" atmosphere, even with ticket discounts, like Chelsea vs LAFC, which drew only 22,137 fans in a 71,000-seat stadium. (espn.com)

5. Empty seats draw criticism

Al-Jazeera reported concerns about empty seats despite heavy marketing, with attendance in some matches ranging between 37.4–43.7% of stadium capacity, showing weak local fan engagement. (aljazeera.net)

5 From Belonging to Brand

Clubs no longer represent just a city or identity.

They have become brands.

Jerseys change every season.

Summer tours span continents for marketing purposes.

Match times are scheduled for global markets.
The old fan, who used to live every moment from the stands, now feels alienated in their own club's world.

Five

Chapter 5

Before 2010, football was simpler… and more honest. We watched matches without knowing every detail of players' private lives, without being flooded by hourly rumors, without checking our phones at halftime to read thousands of opinions. When a referee made a mistake, we got angry and moved on. When a player underperformed, we waited for him to come back stronger. The game was lived in the moment, not replayed endlessly through analyses, posts, and comment sections.

Back then, joy was complete. A goal was seen once and replayed in memory, not in stories. Defeat hurt, but it did not turn into a campaign of humiliation. Football was an escape from reality; today, it has become a reflection of all its tensions.

With the rise of social media and digital media, the rhythm

changed. Football became rushed, nervous, and restless. Every refereeing decision turned into a public trial, every young player carried pressure that even the greatest stars of the past never faced. Passion turned into surveillance, love became governed by algorithms, and the media no longer simply reported the game — it began to manufacture its narrative, and often distort it.

Even VAR, introduced in the name of justice, complicated the experience. It stopped the flow, stole moments of pure madness, and taught fans to doubt even their own celebrations. We wait for the line, the replay, the decision… and only then do we celebrate? Or do we protest? The moment of a goal is no longer truly ours.

Yet nostalgia is not weakness. It is a reminder. A reminder of a time when football was closer to people than to screens, when we loved clubs more than brands, and players more than verified accounts.

More importantly, that nostalgia carries hope. Because if football has lost its soul once, it can find it again. In small stadiums, in fans who reject digital poison, in clean media that chooses depth over sensationalism, and in supporters who decide to love the game for what it is, not for how it is marketed.

The future does not have to be a distorted version of the present. It can be a smart return to the essence: technology that serves the game instead of stealing it; media that explains instead of igniting; and fans who remember why they fell in love with football in the first place.

Football is still capable of bringing joy, unity, and healing.
We just need to listen to its voice again… not its noise.

In the end, we do not miss old football because it was perfect or free of mistakes, but because we lived it with lighter hearts. We miss a time when a match began and ended within ninety minutes, not days of debate. A time when we waited all week for a game, when goals were stored in memory rather than on our phones. A time when players were human before becoming media products, when referees made mistakes and carried on, and when fans got angry but returned to love.

This nostalgia is not a rejection of progress, but a longing for simplicity. A longing for spontaneous laughter after a goal, for honest frustration after a defeat, for emotions that needed no explanation or analysis. Before football became an industry, it was a story—and each of us was part of it.

Even today, despite all the noise, that past still lives within us. In the way we celebrate, in our love for our first club, and in that moment when everything else disappears as the ball hits the net. Perhaps we cannot go back, but we can carry that feeling forward.

Because football, no matter how much it changes, is always at its most beautiful when we remember how we first fell in love with it…

About the Author

Also by Majdoub Mhedhby